Since the passage of the 1997 Amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA '97) and the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, alternate assessments have received increasing attention. Perhaps you have been wondering what alternate assessments are, what they mean for your students, and how you will be able to meet one more new requirement. Many of your colleagues have similar questions. This article answers questions that special educators often ask.

**Important Questions**

**Why Are Educators Discussing Alternate Assessments?**

To strengthen equal access to the general education curriculum, IDEA '97 requires that students with disabilities participate in state and district large-scale assessment programs. Education reform initiatives across the United States use these assessment programs to hold schools and districts accountable for student learning.

Passed in 2001, NCLB directs each state to develop grade level content standards and assessments linked to these standards. Each school and district will be responsible for Adequate Yearly Progress of all students—including all those with disabilities.

Both U.S. legislative mandates provide options for testing students with disabilities. Students may take tests in a standard or regular format. They may use accommodations or, they may participate through an alternate assessment.

In her recent article, Washburn-Moses (2003) reviewed "What Every Special Educator Should Know About High-stakes Testing," emphasizing accommodations, test preparation, and student outcomes. She mentions alternate assessments briefly. Were you one of the teachers who wondered about this option and wanted to learn more?

**What Is An Alternate Assessment?**

"Alternate assessments are data collection procedures used in place of the typical assessment when students cannot take standard forms of assessment" (Ysseldyke & Olsen, 1997, p. 1). Sometimes people confuse these with "alternative" assessments, which are methods of testing students without using traditional paper-and-pencil or multiple-choice tasks. Alternate assessment is the term used in both IDEA '97 and NCLB to designate a formal assessment option for some students with disabilities.

**Who Should Take an Alternate Assessment?**

Some states reserve alternate assessment for students with the most severe disabilities. Other states have a broader policy, acknowledging that students with other disabilities might be best able to show what they know and can do only through an alternate assessment. NCLB limits the use of alternate assessment to students with the "most significant cognitive disabilities." Because state policies result in a wide variation of numbers of students able to participate in the standard assessment, it is likely that there will be much variation in alternate assessment participation rates, as well (Alternate Assessments, 2003). How does your state define the students who may take alternate assessment?

**Who Decides if a Student Should Take an Alternate Assessment?**

Individualized education program (IEP) teams must address the manner in which a student will participate in statewide and districtwide testing. If the
student is unable to show what he or she knows and can do when taking the test the way it is administered to students without disabilities, the team considers whether accommodations used during instruction would facilitate participation. If not, the team recommends that the student participate through the alternate assessment process. What specific guidance or handbooks does your state distribute to help IEP teams make this decision?

**What Does an Alternate Assessment Look Like?**

There is no single model. NCLB asks states to develop their own alternate assessments. Currently, almost all states have alternate assessment policies in place. To find the status of your state’s alternate assessment, check the Web site for your state Department of Education. Or, check the extensive alternate assessment information resources at the National Center on Educational Outcomes Web site (see Figure 1).

Most states use performance-based portfolios in the alternate assessment. Teams must gather samples of student work (paper, video, and electronic) in each tested subject area over time and across a variety of settings. Teachers date the samples and provide information on their connection to the state curriculum for the student’s grade level, the accuracy of the work, and the level of independence the student exhibited. Some states permit the use of checklists or observations by educators. A student’s reflective evaluation about portfolio entries can be a required element, as well. What does alternate assessment look like in your state?

**What Does an Alternate Assessment Cover?**

To comply with NCLB, alternate assessments must relate to the general curriculum. About 90% of states use the same content standards for students with disabilities, and a majority use the same performance standards in most of the major academic areas ([Study of State and Local Implementation](http://example.com), 2003). You will need to become familiar with the content that is expected for each grade level. If you are not already familiar with your state’s expectations, try one subject at a time. English/language arts is a good place to begin, because this area is addressed in almost all special education programs. Your general education colleagues can be invaluable resources, helping you understand the structure and content of the curriculum document. Do you know where to find the curriculum expectations for your state? Have you read them?

**Will the Alternate Assessment Ensure That My Student Graduates?**

This is hard to answer because so much variability in graduation requirements exists throughout the United States ([Alternate Assessment](http://example.com), 2003). About 40% of states require a student to pass the standards-based assessment to graduate; others hold schools accountable rather than students. Some states require all students to meet one set of standards; other states use related standards for students with significant disabilities. In general, grade-level performance demonstrated on an alternate assessment is likely to satisfy the requirement to pass the test. Whatever your state’s policy, alternate assessments are not to be used because the team thinks a student cannot meet the

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**Figure 1: How is YOUR State Addressing Alternate Assessment?**

For the latest information, check the Web site for your state’s Department of Education

OR

Check the National Center on Educational Outcomes for a wealth of information on alternate assessment, including current state-by-state Alternate Assessment policies and practices at: [http://education.umn.edu/nceo/TopicAreas/AlternateAssessments/alt_assess_topic.htm](http://education.umn.edu/nceo/TopicAreas/AlternateAssessments/alt_assess_topic.htm).
expectations of the standard test. Does your state have high stakes for students or for schools? Are students who take the alternate assessment in your state measured against grade-level standards or others?

Why Is Alternate Assessment Necessary for My Students?
Almost every teacher wants an answer to this question. After all, detailed assessment information is regularly gathered for progress reports and regular re-evaluations. Why is more needed?
There are several answers to this question.

• Because the law says so. There is no choice here. The IEP team decides the manner of participation for a student, but the fact of participation is non-negotiable, according to IDEA ’97 and NCLB. Our job as team members is to identify the best way for students to demonstrate what they know and can do.

• To gain an accurate picture of the performance of all students. For years, evaluation systems in many states excluded students who received substantial amounts of special education services. Because these students were usually working below grade level, bypassing them likely resulted in inflated district and state scores—rather like using the height of basketball players to describe the average teenager. As a result of this exclusion, students in special education appeared farther behind than they actually were—and this likely did not help inclusion efforts.

• To increase access to the general curriculum. Our ultimate goal is to help all children participate more fully in the general education curriculum. When students with disabilities are included in systemwide testing, their performance matters more to everyone. Because their performance counts, curriculum resources are likely to be more available; and educators are more likely to focus on adapting lessons, rather than separating students from the content of classroom learning.

• To reduce pressure to place at-risk students into special education. If the scores of students in special education are not reflected in those of the district, it might be tempting to find struggling students eligible for services. Doing so would keep lower scores out of district averages. This would also inflate special education numbers and dilute the amount of attention available for students who are truly eligible.

How Can I Combine the Standards-Based Curriculum With IEP Goals and Objectives?
First—resist the impulse to turn IEPs into curriculum guides. This is unnecessary duplication. Take a look at your students’ IEPs. Each must describe the way the student’s disability impacts progress in the general curriculum and specify current performance levels. Use this information to formulate goals and objectives that increase performance in general curriculum lessons. Some strong examples are presented by Lignugaris/Kraft, Marchand-Martella, and Martella (2001) who demonstrated that solid goals or objectives contain a description of the target, as well as the material and process that will be used to evaluate it (e.g., Given a set of 10 mathematics word problems at his instructional reading level, Jack will be able to identify the question to be answered and the operation to be used with 85% accuracy on 3 consecutive days). If your goals and objectives are this clear, and this relates to the elements of your state’s curriculum, the sample student work you gather to document progress might be fine entries in a portfolio-based alternate assessment.

Second—seek out links between your students’ needs and the lessons taught by your general education colleagues. Cross reference grade-level curriculum topics to your students’ IEP goals and objectives. What skills do your students need to learn? What similar skills and knowledge are tapped across subject matter areas? How can these be related to the content or topic of the general education teacher’s lessons?

How Can I Find Time to Put Together an Alternate Assessment?
Alternate assessments do take time, just as standard assessments do. Many teachers find the first year to be the hardest. A systematic approach is essential. A successful strategy makes gathering student work a regular part of instructional practice. Sorting through months of papers at the end of the year is simply too cumbersome. Here are ideas devised by teachers to streamline alternate assessment procedures.

• Create a system to gather student work on a regular basis. Consider issuing a notebook (complete with dividers) in September to every child completing an alternate assessment. Select one representative sample of student work for this cumulative portfolio, targeting one major subject area each week (see Figure 2). When the time to submit portfolios arrives, you can review this record of selected student work instead of a vast collection of papers accumulated through the year. Periodic review of the portfolio guides your instructional decisions and lesson planning. As a bonus, this collection makes progress reports much simpler to do.

• Combine your energies and efforts. Share the work of gathering assessment data by collaborating with educational team members. Therapists and specialists can reinforce language skills related to goals and objectives which support grade appropriate curriculum topics. Paraprofessionals can observe and document student participation in whole group classroom activities. Coordinating team efforts increases student learning, focuses on

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specific content knowledge, and sup-
ports generalization of skills and strategies. Documenting the results of 
this collaboration distributes the 
responsibilities of alternate assess-
ment.

- **Take advantage of complementary learning experiences.** Especially at 
the secondary level, there is considerable overlap between subject areas. Students write and argue persuasively in social studies. Math concepts are important elements in science class. How do your students participate in 
these activities? Using evidence of 
student learning across varied sub-
jects enhances a portfolio, shows 
application of knowledge, and 
involves more educators in docu-
menting student learning.

- **Use templates or labels when possible.** Every alternate assessment based 
on student work requires identifying 
information that might include some 
or all of the following: student name, 
student identification number, date 
(including year) the work sample was 
completed, content area and standard 
addressed, and an accuracy score. 
Your state may have additional 
required elements. Recording all of 
this by hand for each entry can be 
tedious. Consider making labels or 
checklists of information you find 
yourself writing over and over again 
to decrease time spent on paperwork

and ensure that all required elements 
are provided. Complete identifying 
information each week to reduce the 
burden of doing it all at once.

- **Involv students in the process.** You 
will likely find that students are eager 
to assist in creating their portfolios. 
They enjoy knowing they are partici-
pating in the assessment system—just 
like the other kids—and take pride in 
this visible record of their accomplish-
ment. A teacher of students with 
significant cognitive needs observed 
that one of her students became fasci-
nated by the changes in his Dolch 
reading list record over time. He 
amazed everyone by announcing he 
could “beat his record,” identifying 
(and meeting) learning targets for 
himself that were more rigorous than 
those set by his teachers. Researchers 
have provided several examples of 
how students can be active partners 
in this teaching/assessment cycle 
(Kleinert, Green, Hurte, Clayton, & 
Oetinger, 2002).

How Can I Possibly Make 
This Happen?

After learning the details of alternate 
assessment, many teachers are over-
whelmed. You might be, too. Breathe 
deeply and ask yourself the following 
question: Are you concerned about the 
alternate assessments or the curriculum 
they reflect? The answer leads you to 
different actions, as follows.

**Assessment Concerns.** Everyone feels 
apprehensive about assessments, espe-
cially those with high stakes. Let’s look 
at specifics:

- **Are you concerned that you cannot 
manage the details of the process?** If 
so, learn as much as you can and 
partner with someone else to review 
each other’s work. Ask for help if you 
feel confused. Design a data collection 
system that works for you, your team, 
and your students.

- **Are you worried that your students 
won’t pass the test because they are 
far below grade level?** Some teachers 
fear the hard work of their students is 
not recognized because their students 
will never meet grade level standards. 
If you believe that your students’ cur-
rent performance is very low, work 
with the team to see if there are edu-
cational steps you can take to raise 
that level. You can’t raise student per-
formance in great bounds overnight, 
but you can implement changes that 
will make a difference over time. 
Alternatively, you may believe the 
test will highlight the fact that your 
students have not been working on 
general curriculum topics. If that is 
the case, you may be having more 
worries about the curriculum than 
the assessment. Read on.

**Curriculum Concerns.** Standards-based 
assessments are anchored in specific 
(and lengthy) curriculum documents. 
Sometimes teachers find that the topics 
they have been accustomed to teaching 
have shifted to another grade level or

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**Figure 2: Monthly Data-Gathering Calendar**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Subject Area for Collection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>English/Language Arts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Math</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>History</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Science</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Use templates or labels when possible.**

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been replaced by unfamiliar topics. This 
means a lot of work to master and adapt 
new material. Our general education 
colleagues experienced the pressure of 
aligning with new curriculum expecta-
tions. You might be, too.

- **Are you concerned that you cannot 
master the details of all the curricu-

ulum areas?** If so, you have much
company. Don’t try to do this alone, or all at once. Divide curriculum documents with your colleagues. Review one at a time to become familiar with format and content. General education teachers are much more comfortable with the curriculum. They should be—it’s their area of expertise. Ask them to clarify issues that are confusing to you. You may find yourself collaborating on how instruction could be modified to reach a wider range of students. This could create new opportunities for all students.

Alternate assessment practices like performance-based portfolios can be used to forge powerful new connections between general and special education, meet legal requirements, and help educators acknowledge and count all our students’ accomplishments.

**References**


**Resources on Alternate Assessment and Curriculum**


- Guides readers through an array of curriculum-based assessments for students in inclusive settings.


- Outlines a structured, systematic process to assist teachers in comparing their own curriculum to state guidelines.


- Provides several examples of alternate assessment tasks.


- Translates policy into everyday educational practice.


- Provides a range of assessment strategies and procedures.


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